

A PIANIST'S STUDY OF RACHMANINOFF'S
VARIATIONS ON A THEME OF CORELLI, OP. 42

BY

Maxim Bernard

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Menahem Pressler, Research Director

Menahem Pressler, Chairperson

Karen Shaw

André Watts

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Introduction

Rachmaninoff wrote his *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* during the summer of 1931 in Claire-Fontaine, France, where he owned a villa. These variations are his last work for piano solo and he had not composed any original compositions for the instrument since his time in Russia in 1917. He originally thought the theme of his variations was originally composed by Corelli. He found this theme in the composer's *Sonata for violin and continuo op. 5 no. 12*. He probably encountered this work of Corelli through his collaboration with Kreisler to whom he dedicated his own op. 42. Musicologist and critic Joseph Yasser pointed out to Rachmaninoff after attending one of his concerts in New York, that the theme was not Corelli's but was in fact was called *La Folia*, a Portuguese dance tune probably written during the 16th century by an anonymous composer. It is surprising to notice Rachmaninoff has not recognized the theme of *La Folia* which was also present in Liszt's Spanish Rhapsody, there entitled "*Folies d'Espagne*", a work that he has been playing for at least 10 years before writing his op. 42. Nevertheless, Rachmaninoff decided to leave the name of "Corelli" in the title of his work; his 1931-32 concerts' schedule had already been announced this way which made it a little bit more difficult to change.¹

Although Joseph Yasser noticed the mistake in the title of the work, he also was very enthusiastic about it and he remarked:

This new composition will come to occupy a most important place in the literature of musical variations and will be played to death by pianists.²

Surprisingly, Yasser was mistaken and this masterwork has been neglected by pianists over generations. Why is this work less popular than other works by Rachmaninoff? I feel there are many reasons. The first reason would be that the composer himself somehow did not have full

¹ Bertensson, *A Lifetime in Music*, p. 277.

² Norris, *Rachmaninoff*, p. 104

trust in his own Variations on a Theme of Corelli. When he wrote them, he was in a very depressed state of mind and he even told some friends that he was still composing, but that music did not mean the same anymore for him. His depressing moods were even more accentuated by the fact that during that year of 1931 he signed a letter attacking the Soviet régime, which had for consequence his music was banned in Russia until 1933. Around that same time, he also started to have doubts and worries about his own concert performances. Every single time he performed these variations, he always skipped some of them, deciding on the spot which ones he would skip according to the coughing in the audience! He even sometimes inverted the order of some of them. We can read about these experiences in one of his letters about his new variations sent to Medtner in 1931:

I've have played them here about fifteen times, but of these fifteen performances, only one was good. The others were sloppy. I can't play my own compositions! And it's so boring! Not once have I played these all in continuity. I was guided by the coughing of the audience. Whenever there was no coughing, I would play them in proper order. In one concert ... the coughing was so violent that I played only ten variations. My best record was set in New York, where I played 18 variations.³

It is not the first time Rachmaninoff talks badly about his own works; he had said similar things about his *Second Sonata* for piano. But is a composer always the best person to judge his own works? The fact that Rachmaninoff showed insecurities towards his own variations certainly did not help the case of the work, so that it is appreciated by the general public.

During his first year performing the work, he got good reviews, but also many bad ones. Here is an excerpt of a review he got from music critic Ruth Howell from the Washington Daily News:

There were, perhaps, too many variations. The piece grew long, boring, and the theme thickened so that even Corelli couldn't have found it. If the finale had been put in five minutes before, it would have been perfect. When it was finished, even Rachmaninoff looked a little disgusted.⁴

³ Bertensson, *A Lifetime in Music*, p. 281

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 281

This severe review brings us to the second reason why the work is less popular than his other works. It is maybe the main reason. The problem resides into the general pacing and construction of the work which seem, for many musicians, to have coherence issues. We very often hear pianists complaining about the fact that these variations take a long time to develop, how they are too segmented and how they do not build into a climactic ending.

This essay will take a close look to the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli, op. 42*. It will bring to the forth its strong musical qualities to make it appreciated by a wider group of musicians. In a first step, it will explore the nature of the work including Rachmaninoff inclination to write variations, his difficulties with the larger works, the individuality of each variation, the type of variations and the influences of Schumann. Because of the individuality of these variations, I find necessary to examine each one individually. The essay will make an examination of the variations highlighting what make every single one of them unique, beautiful and special in its own way. In order to do so in my examination, I will pay special attention the origin of the theme, the moods, the topics, the relationships with other works (etudes, preludes songs, variations, etc.), the new aspects of his later style, the modern traits and the incorporation of string-like elements. The goal of this examination is to get closer to the musical essence of these variations and also to highlight their individuality. In a last step, the essay will discuss performing the variations referring to the performance fashion of our time, the different groupings in the variations, the possible omission and inversion of the other of certain variations and also the pianistic difficulties encountered in the work.

Nature of the Work

There is something in Rachmaninoff's own compositional technique that somehow draws him into composing works in variation forms. If we take a look at, for example, his *Second Symphony*, we can clearly see how so much of his material comes from the theme of the *Dies Irae* that is varied. Varying material, or making variations on diverse musical elements, was very present in his compositions.

It makes perfect sense that Rachmaninoff came back to the variation form towards the end of his life with his *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* (1931) and his *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini* (1934) (his first attempt to the genre was in 1903 with his *Variations of a Theme of Chopin*). It surely makes sense because for him, the large forms for piano solo were always complicated and not so successful; they were never entirely satisfying for him. We can just think about the problems he encountered writing his *Second Sonata*. He was struggling to write a large-scale work for piano solo within a sonata framework, which maybe explains the existence of two different versions of his *Second Sonata*. On the other hand, the small pieces, such as his *Preludes* or *Études-Tableaux*, were completely satisfying for him and he was much more comfortable writing them.

As pointed out by Max Harrison, when we listen to the *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*, we can clearly hear three main sections of the work, almost divided into movements. But here in his op. 42, although everything unfolds in a natural way, it leaves “a more diverse initial impression”.⁵ He also notices:

Whatever local unity may be imposed by a tempo on a group of variations, each of them has a distinctly different character and these will not submit to a simple ground plan as does op. 22.

⁵ Harrison, *Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings*, p. 293

Because of the strong individuality that comes out of each variation, I feel the variations can be seen as a set of small preludes or miniature études-tableaux. They are character variations but their interest is found elsewhere than in the pacing of the momentum going from one variation to the next. I think it rather relies within each variation. The compositional approach Schumann had with several of his compositions might have influenced Rachmaninoff in his set of variations. Schumann was the master in composing miniature works. He always found ways in making coherent larger works by bringing together smaller pieces that are very contrasting and individual. There is, of course, a profusion of example on the subject: his *Carnaval*, his *Papillons* or maybe a much more appropriate work here, his *Études Symphoniques*. Rachmaninoff, in his later compositional style, had a tendency to write in a much compact and concentrated way, and his op. 42 is no exception. I feel Schumann's *Études Symphoniques* might have been an influence, maybe an unconscious one, on Rachmaninoff's op. 42. The *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* are also character variations and each variation has a very unique and individual flavor as well. It is interesting to even push the thought further by remembering how Schumann had also compositional difficulties finding the correct pacing through his *Études Symphoniques*; he took out five études which have been categorized posthumous. Pianists have been reintegrating them to the set in various different ways. They usually keep in mind not to lose the feeling of completeness which is essential for a successful performance of the work. A similar approach was intended by Rachmaninoff when he was inverting the order and omitting certain variations of op. 42. The individual nature of these variations offers a variety of selections and order. It will be discussed further in the section about performing the variations of this essay.

Let's now take a closer look at the variations. As mentioned earlier, because of the individual nature of each variation, I feel it is necessary to take a look at every one of them. The origin of the theme, the moods, the topics, the relationships with other works (études, preludes

songs, variations, etc.), the new aspects of his later style, the modern traits and the incorporation of string-like elements will be covered.

Examination of the Variations

Origins of the Theme

La Folia was originally a dance and it is first mentioned in a Portuguese text from the 15th century. It was a chorographical ritual treating of fertility. The dancers were carryings men dressed as women on their shoulders. The quick pace of the dance and its crazy appearance were probably the basics for the words *La Folia*.

Until the middle of the 17th century, it spread to Italy (*Follia*) and also France (*Folies d'Espagne*). The theme quickly evolved into the form we know nowadays with the chord progressions: $i / V / i / VII / III / VII / i / V$

VARIATIONS
on a theme of Corelli

S. Rachmaninoff
op.42 (1931)

Andante

Theme

The musical score is written for piano. It begins with the title 'VARIATIONS on a theme of Corelli' and the composer 'S. Rachmaninoff op.42 (1931)'. The tempo is marked 'Andante'. The first system is labeled 'Theme' and features a piano accompaniment with a cantabile melody in the right hand and a harmonic accompaniment in the left hand. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *mf*, *dim.*, and *cresc.*. The first system shows the theme and the beginning of the first variation. The second system shows the continuation of the first variation. The third system shows the continuation of the first variation.

Example 1: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, Theme, mm. 1-16

It appeared around 1650 and was first published by Lully in 1672. This melody slowed down and found its more definitive version that we know. It became the theme of innumerable variation sets. One of the most famous was the one from Corelli, *Sonata for violin and continuo op. 5 no. 12*, which was published in 1700.

From that moment on, *La Folia* was always very popular in occidental music. Its influence was conscious and sometimes unconscious. Most of the times, *La Folia* took the form of a theme and variations; sometimes it was only quoted in a work (for example: J. Bach's cantata *Mer hahn en neue Oberkeet, BWV 212*); other times it was used as a basis for another melody (Handel's *Sarabande*, Purcell's *Chaconne*); and at some occasions it was even hidden in major works such as in the *Andante* of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*.

The image displays a musical score for 'La Folia'. On the left, there are two systems of staves. The top system shows three staves with a melody in the upper voice, marked with a 'p' (piano) dynamic. The bottom system shows three staves with a pizzicato ('pizz.') accompaniment, with the label 'Bassi.' (Basses) at the bottom. On the right, there is a larger system of staves for woodwinds and strings. The woodwinds (Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon) are marked with a 'p' dynamic and play a complex, rhythmic melody. The strings (Violins, Violas, Cellos, Double Basses) provide a steady, rhythmic accompaniment.



Example 2: Beethoven: *Symphony No. 5 op. 67: Andante*, mm 165-177.

We find also d'Anglebert, C. P. E. Bach, Salieri, Vivaldi, Frescobaldi, Lully, Pergolesi, Marais, Geminiani, Grétry, and Cherubini from the previous generations who used that theme in their works. Eventhough during the 19th and 20th century *La Folía* was a little less popular, it inspired many composers such as Liszt (*Spanish Rhapsody*), Paganini, Rodriguo, Henze, Nielsen and of course Rachmaninoff.

I doubt that Rachmaninoff was aware of these other works using *La Folía* when he was writing his op. 42, at the exception of course of the works of Corelli and Liszt. Music from different times and periods were very often out of reach and difficult to get. It is shocking to know that Rachmaninoff was not aware that Schubert wrote piano sonatas until he was in his forties!

The Theme

The theme itself is stated in a very pure way by Rachmaninoff in a four-voice choral played in the medium-high register of the keyboard. There is so much light and transparency to this theme. Rachmaninoff states this theme in a very sober way, as an epitaph. He puts it on a pedestal as an ideal to reach throughout the different variations. He incorporated few countermelodies and interesting contrapuntal inner voices. It stands still in time and carries the depth of the sounds coming from ancient time. Rachmaninoff looks back to the past of generations of composers who transcribed and varied this famous Portuguese dance tune. Some scholars even point out similarities between this theme and the *Dies Irae* theme which Rachmaninoff was obsessed with and used in numerous of his works. As a performer I feel this theme should be played as something happening in the past; as mere echoes from the past.

The chord progression found in this theme is a chord progression patterns that come from early baroque. It moves back and forth between the minor and relative major mode. Beethoven also used that progression many times in his work such as in the opening of his Sonata op. 90, with the chords i-VII-III. He uses it to suggest the power or dignity of a venerable, authoritative, earlier style. In the development section of the first movement of his Op. 109, the same pattern (i-VII-III, or I- bVII- III, etc.) is sequenced. It is even present in his Egmont Overture, and the finale of the Ninth Symphony (the divoto section, "ahnest du den Schopfer, Welt?"), both of which draw on the Sarabande topic, as well. Perhaps Rachmaninoff was attracted by a similar character in his drawing on Corelli.

Variation I

Here we suddenly change of world coming from the world of Corelli to the one of Rachmaninoff, coming from the past to the present. The remarkable contrasts in register and texture bring the listener to a different mood. This *Poco più mosso* with its syncopated bass and

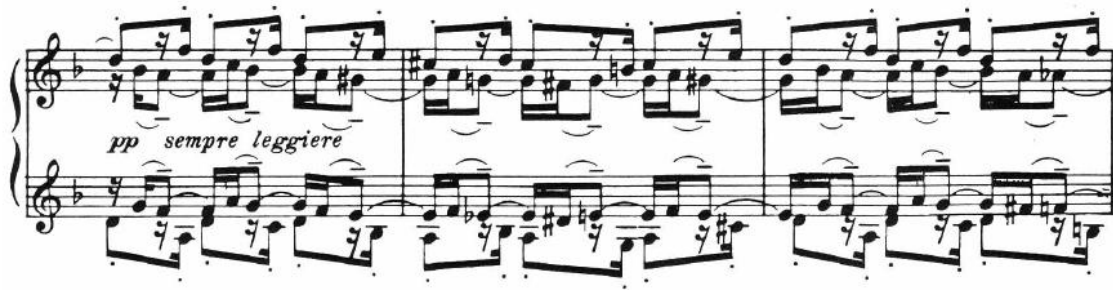
twisted chromaticism establishes an anxious character to this first variation. But we still have here the long singing melodic line of the theme carrying through.

Variation II

In the second variation, Rachmaninoff uses the leap of a minor third found in the theme, in augmentation, as material to install a busy and worried character. The music becomes motoric which is a characteristic of his later style; Stephen Walsh sees this characteristic as “an unconscious result of contact with the motor school of neo-classicism (or perhaps a memory of early Prokofiev)”.⁶ This texture can also be the one of a string quartet. This brings me to discuss a little bit of the influence of string technique on Rachmaninoff’s later style. His last two sets of variations (the op. 42 and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, op. 43) both use a theme coming from the violin repertoire. His collaboration as a duo partner with Kreisler, which lasts for more than a decade at the time of writing this work, probably influenced him in various ways. Let’s remember that it is to the famous violinist Rachmaninoff dedicated the work. Kreisler also published his own edition of Corelli’s *Sonata op. 5 No. 12* in 1927. To come back to this second variation, we can clearly see the influence of violinistic technique such as slurred bowing in the first half of this variation and also spiccato technique in the second half.



⁶ Walsh, Stephen. “Sergei Rachmaninoff 1873 – 1943.” *Tempo* 105 (1973): 12-21.



Example 3: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, Variation I, mm. 1-2 and mm. 9-11

Variation III

This third variation is reminiscent of the *Prelude in D minor*, op. 23 No. 3, which is also marked “*Tempo di Menuetto*”. They also share similar pianistic textures as well as a sinister character. The chords are diatonic, but the sixteenth-note figurations are very chromatic. This brings interesting contrasts within the variation. Rachmaninoff is more adventurous in terms in neighbor harmonies in this variation. He reaches for the first time an important meaningful and distant harmony in measure 14: a D flat major chord. It will be the distant key of the two dream-like variations 14 and 15. The choral style of the variation, the chant-like quality and also the irregular phrases remind us of the music of the Russian Orthodox Church which has been very influential on Rachmaninoff’s style. The fact that he wrote a minuet for this third variation is of course another relationship with the baroque era. This op. 42 is very interesting because it is influenced by so many different aspects coming from different periods in music; the baroque elements, the modern ones, a theme coming from the Renaissance, etc. He also wrote a minuet in the variation 12 of his *Rhapsody of a Theme of Paganini* (please see below). I feel pianists often play this variation too fast as they do not have in mind what the real tempo of a minuet is. It is fascinating to hear Rachmaninoff play the minuet part (variation 12) of his *Rhapsody*. He plays it with a relax tempo, flexibility and grace. Even though the character of the music is different in

the present minuet, I feel there is still something to learn from the minuet style in a work by Rachmaninoff. The articulation of this variation (and also in many more of the set) is extremely detailed.

III

Op. 23, No. 3
(1901)

Tempo di minuetto (♩ = 66)

Example 4: Rachmaninoff: *Prelude in D minor*, op. 23 No. 3, mm. 1-6

Var. XII
Tempo di minuetto (В темпе менуэта)

I

II

p

p

32

cl.

mf

Example 5: Rachmaninoff: *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, op. 43, Variation XII, mm 1-10.

Tempo di Menuetto

Rachmaninoff: Variations on a Theme of Corelli 4/

Var. III

Example 6: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, op. 42, Variation III, mm 1-3.

Variation IV

This fourth variation is reminiscent of the variation 13th of his *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*, op. 22. It uses similar rhythms and grace-note effects found in the earlier variation set. We come back the original register and choral texture of the main theme in this *Andante*. It has a bell-like quality to it which is very characteristic to Rachmaninoff's style. For the first time, he introduces a meaningful "C" natural instead of the usual "C sharp" in the second measure.

Andante

Var. IV

Example 7: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, op. 42, Variation IV, mm 1-3

Var. XIII.
Largo. (♩ = 52.)

Example 8: Rachmaninoff: *Variations on a Theme of Chopin, op. 22*, Variation 13, mm 1-3.

Variation V

There is something very primitive and ancient about this variation. The way Rachmaninoff uses open fifths and octaves as a basic color for the sonorities of the chords gives these specific qualities to this variation. It reminds us of the ancient sound of medieval music, something very archaic or sometimes theorists refer to the prominence of fifths sonorities as a Russian trait in music. The melodic lines (played in octaves split by both hands) that are abruptly interrupted by powerful chords and the bold character of this Allegro give a very martial topic to the whole variation. There are also frequent metrical changes. This aspect is very present in Rachmaninoff's later style which is definitely a characteristic of music from the 20th century. This variation follows roughly the harmonic sequence of the theme but barely its melodic contour.

Variation VI

Variation VI, *L'istesso tempo*, is paired with the previous one. These two variations are quite necessary and vital for the work. With their clear-cut rhythm, they compensate the lack of rhythmic character of the theme. It is highly chromatic but we always find diatonic chords at the beginnings and arrivals of phrases. It has the same war-like character than its pair, the previous variation. These two variations have been very often pointed as a preparation of the variation 19 and 21 of his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, op. 43*. The running triplets in octaves split between hands from variation 5 (op. 42) give to this variation a similar character than the one found in variation 21 of his op. 43. (Please see below)

Var. XXI
Un poco più vivo

I
p staccato
cresc.

II
p

5. PAXMANHOV 5570

Example 9: Rachmaninoff: *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*, op. 43, Variation XXI, mm. 1-3.

Allegro (ma non tanto)
Var. V

f marcato

f sempre marcato

Rachmaninoff: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli* 6

Example 10: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, op. 42, Variation V, mm 1-9.

Variation 6 of his op. 42 with his falling triplets using different groupings creating some hemiola effects can be seen as a preparation for the variation 19 of his op. 43.

Var. XIX
L'istesso tempo
quasi pizzicato

Example 11: Rachmaninoff: Variations on a Theme of Paganini, op. 43, Variation XIX, mm. 1-4.

Var. VI
L'istesso tempo
p leggiero e staccato

Example 12: Variations on a Theme of Corelli, op. 42, Variation VI, mm 1-6.

Variation VII

Here is another variation where Rachmaninoff was influenced by violin technique. He used a wonderful pianistic adaptation of what is called crossed-strings on the violin. He found a way to make very rich sonorities on the piano using powerful octaves in the low register on D, creating a Tonic pedal point. These octaves can surely gain in clarity and sustain by using the *sostenuto pedal*. It would help to fully observe Rachmaninoff's marking "Laissez vibrer" ("Let it ring"). The figurations surrounding the theme are highly chromatic and they add to the terrifying character of this variation. Variation 7 is the resulting climax of the two previous variations. The last four measures are an extension and they change in figurations and textures with powerful diminished seventh chords culminating in a strong finish.

Variation VIII

Variation VIII and IX can also be seen as a pair. Entitled "*Adagio misterioso*", it gives a mysterious flavor that goes way beyond this variation; it expands this mood to the whole variation set. As explained by musicologist Barrie Martyn:

This variation has a musical sense but aimless feel about it, it reflects the psychological mood of the whole work.⁷

The "aimless feel" comes partly from the four indications of *ritardando* and vague oscillation of the main melodic lines. There is something difficult about memorizing this variation. It seems that Rachmaninoff constantly makes small changes along the way in this variation; they seem to be constantly evolving. The pattern is not set, but is in constant motion and reorganization. That kind of treatment of the material reminds me of what Ligeti would do,

⁷ Martyn, Barrie. *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor*, p. 250.

for example in his etudes, years later. I feel it represents a change in Rachmaninoff's late style; he incorporates to his writing modern trends of 20th century compositional techniques.

He also uses many augmented chords in this variation. Its harmony becomes more pungent as it is also the case in variation IX.

Variation IX

This variation comes out of the mysterious mood of the previous one. It bears the same mysterious feeling. Max Harrison sees it as “slightly Busoni-like”.⁸ It seems as if ghosts were appearing and wandering around. The single line of the right hand planning on the chromatic choral with agogic accents found in the left hand creates that effect. Some new chromatic melodic elements are introduced. It is interesting to notice Rachmaninoff used the exact same pianistic texture for these new elements than the one found in the first movement of his *Second Piano Concerto*.



Example 13: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli, op. 42*, Variation IX, mm 9-10.



Example 14: Rachmaninoff: *Second Piano Concerto, op. 18*, 1st Movement: Moderato.

⁸ Harrison, Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings, p. 104

Variation X

Here is a delightful scherzo. It owes something to Mendelssohn who invented the sparkly fairy-like dancing scherzo with its *Scherzo* from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, incidental music, Op.61. Rachmaninoff published in fact his arrangement for piano solo in 1933, only two years after writing his *Corelli Variations*. We can presume he was maybe already processing his thoughts about this arrangement around the time he was composing his op. 42. This variation is veritably a dance of death. The character is nervous, witty and unpredictable with his sudden accents and frequent metrical changes. The last seven measures form a codetta where the macabre character is reinforced with its syncopated low basses. In measures 15 and 16, texture thickens with rapid falling lines going from one, to two, to three and finally to four simultaneous voices creating a scary musical effect.

Variation XI

This short compact variation resembles a toccata. It is very virtuosic and it also has motoric rhythm.



Example 15: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, Variations XI, mm 1-3.

It is interesting to notice the insertion of the D flat major chord in the second measure, preparing unconsciously to the sudden shift of D flat major happening in variation 14. This variation has a certain relationship with variation IX sharing similar arpeggios.



Example 16: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, Variations IX, m. 1.

Variation XII

There is a primitive dance-like quality to this variation. There are great similarities between this variation and his *Étude-Tableau op. 33 no. 1*. They are both using alternating hands and on-the-beat left hand octaves. This variation is a wonderful example of Rachmaninoff's later style as well. His later style was much more concentrated and compact than his earlier one.

Rachmaninoff delivers his message much quicker in this variation than the *Etude-Tableau*.




Example 17: Rachmaninoff: *Étude-Tableau op. 33 no. 1*, mm 1-3.



Example 18: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, Variation XII, mm. 1-4.

Variation XIII

This variation introduces the rhythm  which will be developed in variations 18, 19 and 20. This galloping rhythm will be discussed further in the sections treating of these other three variations. This variation is highly chromatic and almost all the chords are sevenths, ninths, or elevenths. Its character is very passionate and buoyant. Rachmaninoff uses again frequent metrical changes going from a 9/8 rhythm to a 6/8. It somehow reinforces the feeling of a wild horse ride. The last two chords of the variation are very abrupt. It is achieved by this meter change in a way. If we had 16 measures of 9/8 rhythm it would totalize 48 dotted quarter-note beats. We have here 47, which make the end abrupt and sudden.

Intermezzo

This Intermezzo is fascinating for a variety of reasons. It feels, as pointed out by Max Harrison, like a cadenza played in a concerto leading to the orchestra playing the theme in a different color and key (Variation XIV). It breaks down our sense of D minor to skillfully bring us to the distant key of D flat major in the following variation. The music is still tonal but it uses octatonic organization within a tonal sphere. There two main contrasting material used in this variation. We first have a highly ornamented melody accompanied by wide rolled arpeggios and then filigree *veloce* passages in the high register of the keyboard. There are a variety of topics associated with this variation. The brilliant passages suggest an instrument like the cimbalom. The patterns used in these passages are based on the oriental scale (a major scale in which the 2nd and 6th degree are lowered) which gives a Near Eastern flavor to the whole variation. The first part is very much chant-like with its highly decorative ornaments. Strangely, the tune of this variation reminds us of the initial theme of his *Third Piano Concerto, op. 30*. Joseph Yasser saw

in the theme of his concerto a liturgical prototype coming from the Russian Orthodox Church.⁹ Following these ideas, the chant-like melody of the first part could be seen as a solo singer accompanied by a choir (the rolled chords).

Variation XIV

Variation XIV is the return of the main theme but here in the distant key of D flat major. However, it shows more elaborated harmonies and it appears in the lower register of the keyboard. Rachmaninoff enters a distant new world and color with this new key. It almost as if the whole work was in black and white and suddenly here everything is in colors. The abnormality and even unsteadiness can be felt in measure 15 when momentarily we hear a D minor chord in the key of D flat major, as if we were forcefully attracted to the main key of the set. Nevertheless, we do stay in the magic and dream-like world of D flat major. This beautiful choral seems almost like a prayer and it is, with variation XIV, the meaningful core of the work.

Variations XV

Out of the variation XIV, comes a radiant nocturne in the same key in the higher register of the keyboard. How interesting it is to examine the shift from the low register to the higher one compared with the shift from the higher register to the lower one found when moving from the initial theme and to the first variation. At the beginning, we saw a transition from a distant world of the past to the realistic present time of Rachmaninoff. Here, we clearly see in variation XV, an elevation of the soul coming from the prayer of variation XIV. Variation XV has an improvisatory quality and is much longer than the theme.

Variation XIV and XV are in D flat major. The famous 18th variation of his op. 43, *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, is also in that same key and is found similarly midway into

⁹ Yasser, Joseph. "The Opening theme of Rachmaninoff's third Piano Concerto and Its Liturgical Prototype." *The Musical Quarterly* 55 (1969): 313-28.

the work. The shift from D minor to D flat major was a harder one to realize in the *Corelli Variations* than one found in the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, coming from B flat minor. Many scholars have noticed the similarities between the two works, and, as mentioned, many even see his op. 42 as a preparation for his op. 43. Interesting enough variation XV of the op. 42 is parent with variation XVII of the op. 43. Musicologist Stephen Walsh sees them as “distant relatives”.¹⁰ The running eighth notes in the left hand part of variation 15 of the *Corelli Variations* became a mysterious ostinato figure in variation 17 of the *Rhapsody*. They both use neighbor harmonies and three-note figurations in order to prolong a main underlying harmony.



Example 19: Rachmaninoff: *Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini*, op. 43, Variation XVII, mm. 1-3



Example 20: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, op. 42, Variation XV, mm1-4.

Variation XVI

We clearly have a sense that from variation on we are starting a group of variations aiming to the end of the whole work. We come back to the main key of D minor without any

¹⁰ Walsh, Stephen. “Sergei Rachmaninoff 1873 – 1943.” *Tempo* 105 (1973): 12-21.

preparation, as a sudden awakening from a distant dream. The martial character is back with the open fifths and fourths, and the decisive rhythm of the *Allegro vivace* reinforces that character. He again uses the oriental scale with its two minor thirds in flourishes of thirty-second triplets as in the second measure of this variation.



Example 21: *Variations on a theme of Corelli, op. 42*, Variation XVI: mm 1-2.

He uses a great deal of rhythmic and harmonic freedom in this variation. We notice also the extreme clarity of the structure which is also very common in his late orchestral works.

Variation XVII

Variation XVII uses an ostinato in the left hand part using open fifths. The prominent use of ostinatos is a one of the main characteristics of Rachmaninoff's late style. This left hand figuration is again very much influenced by violin technique (the accents being the down bowings).



Example 22: *Variations on a theme of Corelli, op. 42*, Variation XVII: mm 1-2.

There are again many frequent metrical changes, characteristic of his late style. As described by author Nikolai Bazhanov, this specific variation is a distant echo of one of Rachmaninoff's youthful songs: "*Sing, Lovely One, I Beg, No More*" (op. 4 No. 4). The melody returns again and again and it brings to mind "distant life and shore".¹¹ This song also bears the other title of "The Song of Grusia". Here is the poetry associated with song in order to deepen our expressive understanding of it. The author is Pushkin here translated by Irina Zheleznova.

Sing, lovely one, I beg, no more
The songs of Georgia in my presence,
For of a distant life and shore
Their mournful sound calls up remembrance;

For of a moonlit steppe, and night
They cruelly, vengefully remind me,
And of a face long lost to sight,
Well loved, but left, alas, behind me.

When you are nigh, I gaze at you,
And lo! No fatal shadow haunts me:
But at your song's first note, anew
It reappears, and plagues and taunts me.

Sing, lovely one, I beg, no more
The songs of Georgia in my presence,
For of a distant life and shore
Their mournful sound calls up remembrance.

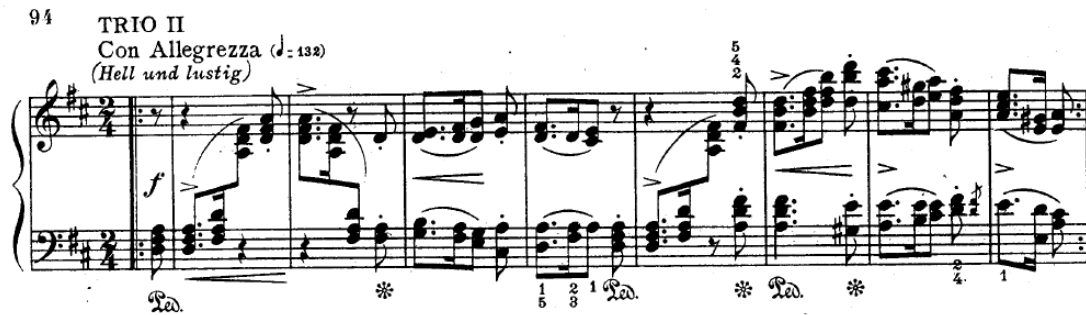
Example 23: "Sing, Lovely One, I Beg, No More" (op. 4 No. 4), Poetry: Pushkin, Translation: Irina Zheleznova.¹²

Variation XVIII

This variation has clearly been influence by Schumann. Rachmaninoff was playing Schumann's *Novelette op. 21 No. 8* for at least a decade when he wrote his *Corelli Variations*. We can find in the second trio section of the work, the same kind of rhythmical impulse, although here in 2/4, and similarities in texture.

¹¹ Bazhanov, *Rachmaninov*, p. 284

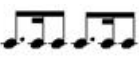
¹² Zheleznova, Irina. "Translations of Pushkin's Poetry." <http://imadin12.narod.ru/entexts/pushkin1.html> (accessed August 2nd 2012).



Example 24: Schumann: *Novelette op. 21 No. 8*, Trio II.



Example 25: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli, op. 42*, Variation XVIII, mm. 1-2.

This obsessive horse-like galloping rhythm  continues in variations 19 and 20 all in 9/8 time signature. It was also found previously in variation 13. The sense of driving galloping rhythm is very present in Rachmaninoff's music. It seems to happen very much so usually towards the end of work. For example, at the end of the third movement of his third we certainly find a similar effect.



Example 26: Rachmaninoff: *Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, op. 30*, Third movement.

Variation XIX

This variation has a faster pace than the previous one with its *Più mosso. Agitato*.

Rachmaninoff uses interesting pianistic effects that imitate quick snare drum rolls. Similar effects have been used towards the end of his Third Piano Concerto.



Example 27: Rachmaninoff: *Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, op. 30*, Third movement.



Example 28: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli, op. 42*, Variation XIX, mm. 1-2.

As keenly pointed out by Martyn, the “ghostly swirls call to mind the same haunted mood as the one found in the last movement of Chopin’s funeral sonata with its vision of wind howling through a graveyard.”¹³

¹³ Martyn, Barrie. Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor, p. 318.

We can see below which very chromatic part of variation 19 he is talking about. Here is again another association with death that is depicted through this work which settles down in the unconscious of the listener.



Example 25: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli, op. 42, Variation XIX, mm. 9-12.*

Variation XX

This last variation is extremely virtuosic and the climax of the whole set. There is a frightening character to it and the sonority reaches its peak with double octaves and full chords. It is very challenging technically (maybe the most demanding of the whole set) with the wide leaps in both hands (luckily going in the same direction). It is interesting to notice the influence of Liszt in this variation. Rachmaninoff had for a long time under his fingers the *Étude d'Exécution Transcendante No. 8* (commonly called “Wilde Jagd”) when he composed his *Corelli Variations*. We can certainly find similarities in both works: the chordal textures and also the rhythms (especially the rhythms found in different sequences of the Liszt’s etude; they might have influenced Rachmaninoff) (please see the examples below).



Example 26: Liszt: *Transcendental Etude No. 8*, mm1-3.




Example 27: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, op. 42, Variation XX, mm. 21-22.



Example 28: Liszt: *Transcendental Etude No. 8*, transitional part.



Example 29: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, op. 42, Variation XIX, mm. 18-20.

This specific variation is related to the previous two variations using all the rhythm  . Measures 17 to 27 of this variation form a codetta where typical rich Rachmaninoff's harmonies are displayed using sevenths, ninths and elevenths. The repeated low Ds in octaves at the end are very dramatic and for me they represent death. They are almost reminiscent of the final "D"s in the last prelude, op. 28 by Chopin where there is nowhere else to go after the last resonances of the morbid gongs. Just even the main key of D minor has very often a typical key associated with death in so many musical works of the past. Examples are abundant going from Mozart's requiem to Liszt's Totentanz. The rhythm here runs out as if a heart would finally stop beating.

Coda

This coda is an epilogue, a final and conclusive commentary on the whole set. It is one of the most meaningful moments of the work. It surely can be seen as the elevation of the soul after death which is based on this long tonic pedal. The left hand arpeggios, remind us of Rachmaninoff's younger style as in his *Prelude op. 23 no. 4* for example. It is very rhapsodic and it has an improvisatory feeling to it. The ending of the work is anti-climactic and anti-virtuosic. It really is a reflective afterthought on the whole work where we can hear the loneliness and despair which were the main emotional content of the variations.

This coda has also similarities with the *Rhapsody op. 43*. The patterns of the left hand part have almost the same figuration than the ones found in variation 18 of the *Rhapsody*. Similarities in melodic contours can also be observed.

Musicologist David Butler Cannata compares this coda to the one written by violinist Albert Spalding, a violinist and composer who had the same manager as Rachmaninoff.. Spalding has made in 1921 a free transcription of the famous *Sonata for Violin and Continuo op. 5 No. 12*

of Corelli and he added a personal coda.¹⁴ It resembles very much, in terms of figurations and general sense of the line, the coda by Rachmaninoff.



Example 30: Corelli/Spalding: *Sonata for Violin and Continuo op. 5 No. 12*, Coda.



Example 31: *Variations on a Theme of Corelli, op. 42*, Coda, Right Hand, mm. 1-3.

Performing the variations

At the beginning of this essay, I first described how Rachmaninoff himself was taking many liberties with his *Variations of a Theme of Corelli* during his performances; he was changing the order of the variations and sometimes omitting many of them. He probably felt the work could be complete even by omitting variations and changing wisely the original order. It brings us back to the nature of the work: there is an individual intrinsic quality to each and every one of them. There are certain variations that cannot be separated from one another. I will cover that subject in greater details when I will discuss the groupings of the variations. Also, we know

¹⁴ Cannata, David Butler. "Rachmaninoff's Concept of Genre." *Studies in Music from the University of Western Ontario* 15 (1995): 59-73.

that Rachmaninoff did write in the score the performer may omit certain variations such as variations 11, 12, and 19. This brings me to discuss the performance practice of our time.

Nowadays, the fashion in trend amongst modern pianists is simply to play everything, without changing a note of the score. Even when a composer specifically writes that performers can omit a part of a work, the general tendency is to play it all! Composers from the Romantic Era (from which Rachmaninoff clearly descends from), very often had a trust into the performer and was hoping he would use his good taste concerning to the printed text of a musical work. Hundreds of examples could be brought up here but it would be the subject of another piano essay. Let's just relate one story to explain my point. When Liszt was teaching his famous master classes in Weimar at the end of his life, one day a student brought to him his famous *Liebesträume No. 3*. After he played, Liszt was very mad because while performing the cadenza written in small notes (found on the second last page of the piece), the student had played exactly what was written on the printed page. "But you are a pianist now, you have to make your own cadenzas!", Liszt spontaneously exclaimed after he played.¹⁵ I feel somehow the new generation is now looking back at performance practice of that time and their goal is not to upset the musicians that could be call purists, but rather to get closer of the real nature of the works and how they were played at that time.

Rachmaninoff certainly had no objection letting pianist Vladimir Horowitz making his own version of his Second Sonata by mixing both of the existing two versions, and rearranging certain parts. They are certainly many different options to choose from concerning the *Corelli Variations*. However, performers must pay special attention to the groupings of the different variations.

¹⁵ Göllicher ,August. *The Piano Master Classes of Franz Liszt, 1884–1886*.

Many scholars have tried to explain the general groupings of the variations. Barrie Martyn even sees the work fitting into a loose sonata structure including a first movement (an Allegro and Scherzo in D minor; theme and variations 1 to 14), a slower second movement (Adagio in D flat major; variations 14 and 15) and a finale in D minor (variations 16 to 20).¹⁶ To my opinion, I think the individual nature of each variation do not allow such a drastic and definite segmentation. The work is almost like a group of miniature Étude-Tableaux or Preludes. Finding such a definite structure to this op. 42 would be equivalent to finding a sonata structure in the *Tableaux d'une Exposition* by Mussorgsky or in the *Études Symphoniques* by Schumann!

Max Harrison also tried to find groupings in the Corelli Variations according to the tempo of each variation and how the different characters relate to one another. He sees the theme and the first two variations as something rather slow; then comes a Minuetto in variation 3 and another slow variation; then variations 5 to 7 are scherzo-like; variations 8 and 9 are slow with exploratory harmonies; variations 10 to 13 have scherzo characteristics; then comes an Intermezzo; variations 14 and 15 are slow; variations 16 to 20 have quick pace; and finally comes a coda.¹⁷ As explained at the beginning of this essay, this scholar believes more in the unity of each variation and how few variations relate to one another in groupings, instead of an overarching direction present throughout.

I feel certain variations or parts of that op. 42, may not be ordered differently or omitted. Otherwise the structure and message of the work would suffer greatly. These parts are the foundations or pillars of the work. Of course, first of all I include in this category the main theme; then surely the Intermezzo, variations 14 and 15 in D flat major, variations 18th and 20th (the ending driving force of the work), and naturally the coda. From the center of the work (which is the Intermezzo and the two D-flat variations) to the end, there are very few options of alteration.

¹⁶ Martyn, Barrie. Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor, p. 316.

¹⁷ Harrison, Rachmaninoff: Life, Works, Recordings, p. 294.

A performer could omit variation 19 as suggested by Rachmaninoff. To my taste, I think it is better to keep this variation in the set, because it adds very much to the final build-up of the work. There is a driving force in this section of the piece which Rachmaninoff himself commented on while playing the work for his friend Alfred Swan in 1931:

This crazy galloping here....all the mad rushing is necessary in order to erase the theme.¹⁸

In the first part of the work, there are many more changes that are possible to make without affecting the completeness of the work. I would leave let the reader to make his own choice and selection. But surely there are few variations that have an ending that is open; I mean that their ending is written in such a way that it must continue to the next variation without closing itself. I am thinking of variation 9, the Intermezzo, and also variations 14, 16 19 and 20. Performer should pay careful attention to these variations if they plan a rearrangement of the set.

The work represents certainly a number of pianistic difficulties for the interpreter. According to his friend Benno Moiseiwitsch, Rachmaninoff had very little difficulties with his own works and they were easily falling in his fingers; this was not always the case with other works. Moiseiwitsch relates he had to start practicing scales and arpeggios when interpreting the classic masterworks.¹⁹ Surprisingly, even for Rachmaninoff himself with his marvelous technical means, his Corelli variations did represent a technical challenge. You can refer yourself to the letter he wrote to Medtner (third citation of this essay) to observe that he recalls most of the performances of this work as being “sloppy”. I think that one of the main difficulties of the work is to be able to use a variety of technical tools at short intervals of time. It is a little bit like in the *Étude d'après Paganini No. 6* by Liszt/Paganini for example, where the performer as change

¹⁸ Martyn, Barrie. *Rachmaninoff: Composer, Pianist, Conductor*, p. 319.

¹⁹ Moiseiwtsch, Benno. “Benno Moiseiwitsch speaks about Rachmaninoff.” *Youtube Online*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5XzPta3KdE> (accessed on August 1st 2012).

quickly from chords alternations, to powerful arpeggios, to delicate rapid notes, etc. The performer needs to have facility to quickly change of technical “tool” in order to play well the Rachmaninoff’s *Corelli Variations*. I feel also that the writing of op. 42 is very compact, precise and extremely detailed which makes it more difficult to master. Also very often we have in mind that Rachmaninoff’s works are what we call “pianistic”; that they fall well under the fingers as mentioned above. For example, if we think about two famous concerti. Rachmaninoff’s *Third Piano Concerto*, as difficult it is can be, can be called “pianistic”. On the contrary, a piece such as Brahms’ *Second Piano Concerto*, with its orchestral writing for the piano is far to be pianistic to my point of view. In the op. 42, we find a less “pianistic” approach from Rachmaninoff which is surprising coming from him. This peculiarity makes the work more difficult to perform well. The approach is less pianistic because very often it comes from violin technique (or even string quartet in variation 2 for example) adapted for the piano, as we discussed on several occasions in this essay.

Conclusion

I see the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, op. 42 as one of the best Rachmaninoff’s compositions. I feel the true nature of the composer comes out in that specific work creating one of the darkest works of the piano repertoire. Their strength resides in the individual nature of each variation rather than in the overarching structure. The writing is more much more concise and compact than in the earlier works by Rachmaninoff. They represent a journey, one of the richest ones, in the life of Sergei Rachmaninoff. So many variations are reminiscent of the composer’s former life. Many of them remind us of his earlier songs, of a former *Étude-Tableaux* or *Prelude*; works he wrote when is back then in his dear motherland. These variations are fascinating because they look at so many different directions at once. They look back to the Baroque Era, and even the Renaissance, with *La Folia*. This theme has so much depth to it and was in the

unconscious collective of the world for centuries. They look back at Rachmaninoff former work as mentioned. They also look back at former composers of the past: Liszt, Chopin and Schumann, composers who were very influential on Rachmaninoff. They also look to the future; to future works of Rachmaninoff such as his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, to the future modern aspects of 20th-Century Music, announcing Ligeti, and also using frequent meter changes. The depressed nature of the composer can truly come to the fore in this work and its variety of topics: macabre, war-like, martial, etc. Rachmaninoff was drawn to the *Dies Irae* his whole lifetime and he had an intuitive association with death during his whole life. We can clearly here the association in this set of variations in D minor, which represents somehow for pianists the swan song of his piano solo works.

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